

## **DRAWN TO JESUS BY HIS SPIRIT** **(Matthew 27:45-54)**

Lee Eclov is a retired pastor in Illinois. He tells a story about the time his neighbor, Linda, discovered that her cat had run away and wouldn't come home. Now the cat didn't wander very far. He was just in the back yard, 20 feet up a tree, but he wouldn't come down. It was cold. It was rainy, and that darn cat stayed up in the tree for three days.

Another friend named Jim brought his extension ladder over to help. He called upon Lee for his assistance. Lee, graciously offered his expertise which happens to be ladder-holding in the rain.

As Lee held the ladder, Jim climbed it until he was eyeball-to-eyeball with the cat. Now, that cat hadn't eaten in three days. It was cold and scared; so, when Jim finally got up there, do you think the cat was not glad to see him? Not all. In fact, that cat was downright hostile.

Wisely, Jim brought along a towel. He put the towel over the cat's head and pried its claws out of the tree. Jim did all the rescuing. All the cat did was hiss and then let go.

Eclov said, "Salvation is often a lot like that—it is when we finally let go. None of us can look to Jesus, remembering our rescue, and say, 'We made a good team, didn't we!'"

In the gospel of John, Jesus used a word twice, as far as I know, and this one word describes how we come into a relationship with Him. We read in John 6:44 where Jesus says, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." The same word that is translated as *draws* in this verse is used by John later in his gospel and by Luke in Acts. In John 21, we read the story of how the disciples cast their net on the right side of the boat per Jesus' instructions. That net was immediately flooded with fish. John reports, "And now they were not able to *haul* it in" (v. 6).

That leads me to say that we participate in our own salvation just like a fish participates in being caught in a net and dragged aboard.

The last time this word shows up in the NT is in Acts 16 where we learn that Paul and Silas cast out a demon from a slave girl. The unclean spirit had been using the girl to tell fortunes thus making money for her owners. We read in v. 19, "But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and *dragged* them into the marketplace before the rulers."

It is the Holy Spirit of God who drags us into the presence of the Savior—not to be judged by to be saved.

With that as context, let's look at the second time Jesus spoke the word. He spoke it during Passion Week. Jesus announced, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself" (John 12:32). What does Jesus mean by "all people"? Is He saying that everyone will be saved in the end? I don't think so. He is not saying all people without exception. He is saying, all people without distinction. In other words, Jesus will draw to Himself, young people and old people, poor people and rich people, white people, and brown people, and black people.

Look at what John added in the very next verse, "He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die" (v. 33). What kind of death would involve Jesus being lifted

up? Crucifixion. When a man was crucified, he was lifted up between heaven and earth.

By His death on the cross, the Spirit of God draws people to Jesus. We are going to look at three ways He does that. Our text is Matthew 27:45-54.

### **The Spirit of God Draws Us to Jesus by What We See at the Cross**

When you compare all four gospels with one another, we get a clear timeline of what took place during Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus was crucified at 9 AM. He died about 3 PM. We are told of something strange that happened between Noon and 3. Darkness reigned over the land. We are not told that cause of this darkness. It could not have been a solar eclipse because Passover is always held on a full moon. You can't have a solar eclipse during a full moon because the moon is on the other side of the sky than the sun.

The cause of this darkness is unknown, but it is fitting. The light of the world is being extinguished on the cross. In protest, the sun does not shine. This was unusual weather. We are not told that there were rain clouds or a storm, but there was darkness.

This darkness was reminiscent of the ninth plague that struck the land of Egypt in Exodus 10. Moses claimed it was "a darkness to be felt." Have you ever experienced a darkness that was so thick you could feel it? In Exodus, the darkness lasted last three days rather than three hours. God was punishing Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. The Egyptians worshiped the sun God, but through that plague of darkness, God showed Himself to be the One who was truly in charge of the weather.

In our story, God is not punishing the people. He is punishing His Son on behalf of the people.

There was something else to be seen that day. Actually, I should say, "There was someone else." Look back to v. 36 which was part of last Sunday's text. Look also at the beginning of v. 54. The soldiers kept their eyes on Jesus. They kept their eyes on Jesus because that was their job but also because He was a magnetic figure.

The soldiers there that day, particularly the Centurion, probably thought they had seen in all and heart it all. By the way, the word Centurion comes from our word for century. A century is 100 years and a Centurion commands 100 men. This was not their first crucifixion. They had seen frightened men die, hard men die, unrepentant men die. Some pled for mercy. Some cursed. Some tried to bargain. They had never seen anyone die like Jesus. When they grabbed His arms to pound the nails into his wrists, He didn't fight back. He didn't resist. Instead of cursing them, He prayed for them.

Crucifixion was meant to rob the accused of his last shred of dignity, and yet, Jesus died with His dignity intact. While He experience horrific pain, to be sure, He seemed to be entirely at peace. It was not uncommon for crucified men to linger for days on the cross. In the end, they could lose consciousness as their life ebbed away.

In contrast, Jesus was only on the cross for six hours. We are told in v. 46 that Jesus spoke in a loud voice. Then, in v. 50 we are told, "And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit." There is a sense in which Jesus' life was not taken from Him. Instead, He gave it up of His own accord. He voluntarily laid down His life.

This was something different. It caught that attention of the men who had crucified

Him. It garnered their admiration and even allegiance.

There is a word that shows up often in our English Bibles. It is found more than 1000 times, and yet, we seem to read the word without every stopping to think about what it is telling us to do. It is the word *behold*. It means, “to fix your gaze upon” something or Someone. It is what John the Baptist told his disciples when Jesus came near. He said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29).

I am reminded of something the late Eugene Peterson wrote. Listen to his wise counsel:

Two commands direct us from the small-minded world of self-help to the large world of God’s help. First, “Come, behold the works of the Lord.” Take a long, scrutinizing look at what God is doing. This requires patient attentiveness and energetic concentration. Everybody else is noisier than God. The headlines and neon lights and amplifying systems of the world announce human works. But what of God’s works? They are unadvertised but also inescapable, if we simply look. They are everywhere. They are marvelous. But God has no public relations agency. He mounts no publicity campaign to get our attention. He simply invites us to look . . .

The second command is, “Be still, and know that I am God.” Be still. Quit rushing through the streets long enough to become aware that there is more to life than your little self-help enterprises. When we are noisy and when we are hurried, we are incapable of intimacy—deep, complex, personal relationships. If God is the living center of redemption, it is essential that we be in touch with and responsive to that personal will. If God has a will for this world and we want to be in on it, we must be still long enough to find out what it is (for we certainly are not going to learn by watching the evening news). Baron von Hugel, who had a wise word on most subjects, always held out that “nothing was ever accomplished in a stampede.”

It is at the cross that the Holy Spirit helps us to behold and be still.

### **The Spirit of God Draws Us to Jesus by What We Hear at the Cross**

Earlier, I mentioned that when we compare the gospels with one another we get a clear idea of what happened at the cross. One thing we learn is that Jesus spoke seven times while He was there. On behalf of those who crucified Him, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” To the criminal who professed faith in Jesus, Jesus assured him, “Today, you will be with Me in paradise.” To His mother, Mary, and to His disciple John, Jesus said, “Behold, your son!” and “Behold, your mother!” Jesus made provision for His mother to be care for when He was gone. All three of those sayings took place while the sun was shining, during His first three hours on the cross.

Everything else was spoken in the darkness. The first word spoken in the darkness was a dark prayer, a prayer of complaint. It is also a quotation of Scripture. Look at

Psalm 22:1. What David wrote here perfectly aligns with what Jesus experienced. The interesting thing is that this psalm predates the invention of crucifixion. It is widely believed that the Persians invented crucifixion in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and this psalm would have been written in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Notice some of the parallels (22:7-8, 14, 16, 18).

Last week, I mentioned that the suffering Jesus endured was physical, emotional, and spiritual. The spiritual pain of the cross is in view in v. 46. Jesus had always known the fellowship of His Father, but on the cross, as Jesus took upon Himself the sin of all who would trust in Him, that fellowship was severed. He found Himself, for the first time, bereft of the presence of God.

In real time, Jesus is experiencing the truth of 2 Cor. 5:21, “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus becomes sin, and God turns His back on Jesus because He is too holy than to look upon sin.

For Jesus, this must have been the greatest pain of the cross, this separation for His Father.

Our text does not record some of the other things Jesus said in the darkness. For instance, Jesus said, “It is finished.” It was the word spoken by a servant when he had completed the task His Master had given him to do. Jesus had fully completed everything His Father had sent Him to earth to accomplish.

The final thing Jesus said was also a prayer. He prayed, “Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit” (Luke 23:46). He spoke this in a loud voice according to Luke and Matthew.

In his book, *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott wrote:

I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I turn to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness.

That is the God for me. He set aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death.

The Spirit of God speaks to us through what we hear at the cross, and He draws us to Jesus.

### **The Spirit of God Draws Us to Jesus by What We Feel at the Cross**

Feelings play a part in the salvation process. We are not just rational creatures. We feel. We feel shame. We feel guilt. We feel trust, and hope, and love, and assurance, and God uses our feelings as He draws us to Himself.

Matthew tells about several miracles that attended Jesus’ death. Look again at vv. 51-53. These miracles were designed to makes us feel—fear, hope, expectancy.

The purpose of the curtain was to separate the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.

Only one man could enter the Holy of Holies, and he could only do so on one day of the year—the Day of Atonement. He would go in and sprinkle blood on the Mercy Seat to atone for the sin of God’s people for one more year.

During the time of Jesus, the curtain was said to be 60 feet high, 30 feet wide, and was believed to be 4 inches thick. It was enormous, and it was a barrier that prevented access to the very presence of God.

God shredded that barrier from top to bottom. By doing so, He signified that because of what Jesus achieved on the cross, we now have unfettered access to Him. We don’t have to go through a priest. The way has been opened.

Matthew is the only writer to tell us of graves being opened. This passage is a bit strange and leaves us with some unanswered questions, but the point is clear. Jesus is the One who gives life.

We are told that the Centurion and his soldiers felt awe as a result of what they had seen, heard, and experienced at the cross. They were the first Greeks to trust Jesus as the Son of God following His death on the cross.

Dr. Jerry Root is a professor of evangelism at Wheaton College in Illinois. He is a C.S. Lewis scholar and the author of numerous books. I close with a story he shared about a woman who was drawn to Christ by the Holy Spirit.

While my flight was delayed, I met a woman in the Vienna airport. She was wearing a lanyard with a name tag and carrying a clipboard and obviously taking a survey for the airport. When she came to me, I asked what her name was. “Allegra,” she replied.

“Allegra, are you from Vienna?” She answered, “No, I grew up in southern Austria.” With that answer came the permission to ask, “What brought you to Vienna?” She said she was a student. This opened the door to more questions. *Where did she go to school? What was she studying?*

After 20 minutes or so, I knew a good deal about Allegra. I knew her mother abandoned the family to go to Canada with her lover. I learned her father’s bitterness was toxic. I learned her brother also attended the University of Vienna, but that they were estranged.

When I expressed my sadness for what seemed to be a good deal of estrangement from the people closest to her, she said it was far worse than she confided. She told me she had a boyfriend who went to study art in Florence for six months. He asked her to wait for him, and she did so. Her boyfriend returned the very day before I met Allegra only to inform her, he met somebody better in Florence.

I knew where God was wooing her, and I knew the deep felt need where Allegra was likely to hear the gospel. After 20 minutes, she had not asked me one question. I said to her that I knew she had a survey to fill out but that I had been sent to tell her something. She wondered if I was a plant, put there by the airport, to see if she was doing her job. I assured her it was nothing like that, but I had something to say to her once she finished her survey questions.

She rushed through the airport's survey, then put down her pen, looked me in the eye, and eagerly asked, "What were you supposed to tell me?"

Knowing that Allegra felt abandoned and betrayed, I said to her, "Allegra, the God of the universe knows you and loves you; He would never abandon you or forsake you." I said it to her again: "Allegra, he loves you!"

Sometimes, it takes three times before the words sink in, so I said it again: "Allegra, he loves you!" After the third time she burst into loud sobs. Everyone in the gate area was looking in our direction. Through her tears, Allegra blurted out, "But I've done so many bad things in my life!" I responded, "Allegra, God knows all about it and that's why he sent Jesus to die on the Cross for all of your sins and to bring you forgiveness and hope." I was explaining the gospel to ears willing to hear and a heart willing to receive.

We have been to the cross of Jesus this morning. At the cross, we have stopped to look and to listen. I believe the Spirit of God has also been present. He has helped us to see things we might have missed otherwise. He has helped us to hear truths that could have escaped us. And He has helped us to feel certain things—the weight of our own guilt, the good news of what Jesus has done, and what He offers. And just maybe, the Holy Spirit is drawing you closer and closer to Jesus. Don't resist His pull. Let Him draw you closer and closer to Jesus.